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BLUEGRASS GRAPES

By Melissa Moody, Contributing Writer

Above: Chuck Smith worked with vines at his Smith-Berry Winery and Vineyards in Henry County.

Photo by Melissa Moody, Contributing Photographer

Chuck Smith and Mary Berry-Smith are eighth generation farmers in Henry County, Ky. The couple owns a farm in Newcastle, and until five years ago, they were traditional Kentucky farmers, growing primarily tobacco and raising dairy cows.

That's all changed, though.

"Three years ago we diversified into growing grapes and making wine," Smith said.

The Smith-Berry Winery and Vineyards now have their homegrown wine in Louisville restaurants such as 211 Clover Lane and Lilly's, and at retail outlets like The Wine Rack.

"We're in our fifth year; I know all the books and models say it takes seven to nine years before profitability," Smith said. "It's hard, but it's been good."

The couple no longer grows any tobacco at all, and they have switched from raising dairy cows to beef cattle. They turned their dairy barn into an art gallery, where they host concerts and lunches, and grow organic vegetables in addition to producing three different varieties of grapes: Norton, Chamborcin and Vidal White. To give their wines variety, they also purchase grapes from other places.

The entire process – from berries to a bottle of wine – takes about three years in addition to the three to five years before the vines are vibrant in production.

But growing grapes isn't new to Kentucky.

"Kentucky has a history of grape growing," Smith said. "Before the Civil War, we were the third biggest grape grower in the Union."

Kentucky had the first commercial vineyard in the country, in Jessamine County, and John James Dufour founded the Kentucky Vineyard Society in 1798. Though the Civil War halted grape production in the state, farmers are turning back to Kentucky's roots.

"We're starting a new chapter in a very old story," said Bill Clary, with the Kentucky Department of Agriculture.

"The industry is pretty new, the main growth has been in the past three to five years," Smith said. "But Kentucky has already surpassed Indiana in the number of wineries and acres planted."

The marked increase in wine production and vineyards in Kentucky is partly attributable to the state's great climate and soil for growing grapes, and the fact that many Kentucky farmers are looking for new crops to plant instead of tobacco.

The Smiths saw their chance to get out of tobacco farming after visiting vineyards in California and seeing an agricultural product that would work well in Kentucky.

"This is a good place to grow grapes," Clary said. "Grapes need a long summer, and a temperate climate, plus Kentucky has good soil and adequate water."

The Kentucky legislature has also helped the fledgling industry gain ground. In the 2005 session, the legislature put funding toward

marketing initiatives for the Kentucky wine industry, and the Kentucky Crop Program is designed to boost sales of locally-grown products as well as provide administrative help to producers.

During the 2006 legislative session, the legislature created the Kentucky Grape and Wine Council, an industry group appointed by the governor to look out for the interests of wine producers, Clary said.

And a 2006 grant from the Kentucky Agricultural Development Board totaling \$585,000 and obtained with help from the Kentucky Grape and Wine Council, the Kentucky Vineyard Society, and the Kentucky Department of Agriculture allowed the University of Kentucky to hire two full-time professionals: Kaan Kutural, an expert on the cultivation of grapes for winemaking, and Tom Cottrell, an expert on the science of winemaking.

This season their help is more than necessary.

An unusually late frost and very warm weather early in the spring combined to disastrous effect. Kutural estimated nearly 60 percent of Kentucky's grape crop was lost, and Clary applied to the federal government to have the state designated as an agricultural disaster area.

"It was pretty devastating," Smith said.

If the state is designated a disaster area, vineyards can apply for low-interest loans to help recover their losses. Clary said he expects the USDA to do so.

But the future still looks bright, he said.

"There are no guarantees in life, but Kentucky is a good place to grow grapes."